

# BEYOND THE GED

PROMISING MODELS FOR  
MOVING HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS  
TO COLLEGE

*Executive Summary*

Elizabeth Zachry Rutschow  
Shane Crary-Ross

January 2014



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## Overview

Nearly 39 million adults in the United States do not have a high school diploma. Roughly two-thirds of them eventually obtain a high school equivalency credential like the General Educational Development (GED) certificate, with the hope of then obtaining a job. But in today's changing economy, possessing a GED certificate — while helpful for finding employment — often isn't enough, and many GED recipients will continue to struggle in the labor market. Postsecondary education is also helpful to improve their employment prospects, but fewer than 5 percent of GED recipients go on to enroll in college or other adult education programs.

Emphasizing results from quasi-experimental and experimental research, this literature review identifies the most promising approaches for increasing dropouts' rate of attaining a GED certificate or other high school credential and making a successful transition to college. The report divides these recent interventions into three primary types of adult education reforms: (1) efforts to increase the rigor of adult education instruction and the standards for achieving a credential; (2) GED-to-college “bridge” programs, which integrate academic preparation with increased supports for students' transition to college; and (3) interventions that allow students to enroll in college while studying to earn a high school credential.

Though rigorous research on these reforms is limited, two available studies suggest that programs that contextualize basic skills and GED instruction within specific career fields and that support students in their transition to college show promise in increasing the rate of students' persistence, earning a high school credential, and entering and succeeding in college. In comparison with traditional adult education programs, these models tend to (1) provide more coherent and relevant instruction through curricula that better align with students' career goals; (2) provide increased connections with colleges and vocational training programs; and (3) build in an advising component that fosters students' engagement in the program and supports their transition to college.

While these innovations represent promising strides for the field, adult education is still in critical need of reform across a number of areas if the field is to see larger-scale improvements in dropouts' academic success. First, programs will need to consider how to advance students with lower skills, as few college-readiness adult education programs are available to those with skills below the ninth-grade level. Promising programs, such as LaGuardia Community College's GED Bridge program in New York City and the state of Washington's I-BEST program, which enroll lower-skilled students, may serve as models. Alternately, programs might consider building “prebridge” models that help prepare students for these more advanced programs. Second, the fragmented funding streams and agencies upon which adult education programs rely should be streamlined, allowing for a more coherent focus on college- and career-readiness skills. Promising models have been suggested in the Adult Education and Economic Growth Act and revisions to the Perkins Act. In addition, statewide reform efforts in states such as Indiana and Washington could serve as models for achieving interagency integration and coordination.



## Preface

As globalization and technological change remake the labor market, it has become increasingly clear that the United States must create better educational and workforce training programs if we are to remain competitive. In order to help disadvantaged and low-skilled workers advance in the new labor market, educational opportunities are needed that can boost their ability to succeed in high-demand career areas that pay better wages.

America's federally funded adult education programs represent an underutilized resource in meeting this goal. Targeting the nearly 39 million adults in this country who have yet to earn a high school credential, these programs have served as a lifeline for decades in helping millions of high school dropouts build their reading, writing, and math skills. However, despite their promise, such programs have generally been less successful in helping students make the transition into postsecondary education and training required for better-paying jobs. As a result, many students who have obtained an alternative high school credential such as the General Educational Development (GED) certificate have remained on the sidelines as our labor market has moved forward into the 21st century.

This report provides a much-needed review of innovations in the adult education field aimed at helping high school dropouts overcome these barriers and make the transition to postsecondary education and training. Highlighting results from rigorous studies, the report documents reforms that have a number of promising methods for promoting dropouts' transition to college, including the development of new, more rigorous college- and career-readiness curricula; enhanced supports such as assistance with college admissions and applying for financial aid; and increased on-the-ground connections with postsecondary institutions. The review finds that the most promising program reforms integrate basic skills and GED instruction within specific career fields and provide enhanced supports to ease students' entry into college.

While the current research is promising, much more needs to be investigated — and at a much higher level of rigor than has been standard in adult education practice. Policymakers must make it a priority to better understand what types of program reforms are most effective for different subsets of students, such as students with lower skills or those who can only attend programs part time. Armed with this knowledge, adult education has the potential to serve as a foundation for building the skilled workforce needed in today's and tomorrow's marketplace.

Gordon L. Berlin  
President





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The Authors



## Executive Summary

Postsecondary education has become a critical pathway to help improve adults' labor market chances. As the U.S. labor market has shifted toward jobs that require more critical thinking and specialized skills, the real earnings of those with only a high school credential have decreased.<sup>1</sup> Higher-level academic abilities are now crucial even in traditional blue-collar jobs such as machining and manufacturing, given how technological advances have changed the skill requirements of work.<sup>2</sup> The past decade has thus seen an increasing push toward improving individuals' college- and career-readiness skills, particularly by increasing their access to and success in postsecondary education and training. For instance, both the federal government and major national foundations have called for dramatic increases in the number of college graduates over the next 10 to 15 years, and have invested millions of dollars in efforts to improve students' levels of college entry and success once there.<sup>3</sup>

Despite this push, far less attention has been paid to those who have yet to achieve a critical milestone needed for college entry: a high school diploma. Approximately 39 million adults, representing nearly 18 percent of the U.S. adult population, have yet to earn this credential, barring most of them from starting on a pathway toward the workforce credentials and college degrees needed for higher-paying jobs in today's marketplace.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, traditional adult education and General Educational Development (GED) programs, which have served as the main vehicle for preparing older adolescents and adults to earn a high school credential, have been unable to help large numbers of students achieve this goal and make a successful transition

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<sup>1</sup>Frank Levy and Richard J. Murnane, *The New Division of Labor: How Computers Are Creating the Next Job Market* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Frank Levy and Richard J. Murnane, *Dancing with Robots: Human Skills for Computerized Work* (Washington, DC: Third Way, 2013); Robert Half International, "The Specialist Economy: How Businesses and Professionals Can Prepare for the Trend Toward Specialization," White Paper (New York: Robert Half International, 2013); Economic Policy Institute, "Hourly Wages by Education, 1973-2011 (2011 dollars)," *The State of Working America* (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2012).

<sup>2</sup>Levy and Murnane (2004).

<sup>3</sup>Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, *Postsecondary Success* (Seattle, WA: Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2009); Lumina Foundation for Education, *Lumina Foundation's Strategic Plan: Goal 2025* (Indianapolis, IN: Lumina Foundation for Education, 2009); Office of the Press Secretary, "Excerpts of the President's Remarks in Warren, Michigan and Fact Sheet on the American Graduation Initiative," Press Release, July 14 (Washington, DC: White House, 2009).

<sup>4</sup>This statistic is from the 2010 U.S. Census, as reported in GED Testing Service, *2011 Annual Statistical Report on the GED Test* (Washington, DC: GED Testing Service, American Council on Education, 2012a). It refers to the percentage of the U.S. population above age 16 who lacked a high school credential and were not enrolled in any educational program at that point in time.

to college.<sup>5</sup> In addition, researchers have argued that recipients of GED certificates, particularly those who dropped out of school, tend to have poorer social and emotional skills than traditional high school graduates. These poorer skills are often manifested in a number of counterproductive behaviors such as tardiness and poor attendance.<sup>6</sup> Many of these individuals thus are in need of supports to develop the “soft skills” necessary for success in college and their careers.

Fortunately, a number of adult education practitioners and organizations have been attempting to help by creating new instructional programs aimed at helping nongraduates obtain a high school credential and successfully make the transition to college and higher-level workforce training programs. This report identifies three primary types of adult education reforms: (1) efforts to increase the rigor of adult education instruction and the standards for achieving a credential; (2) GED-to-college “bridge” programs that provide stronger connections among adult education, college, and workforce training; and (3) interventions that allow students to enroll in college and programs that offer workforce credentials while concurrently completing the requirements for a high school degree. Though rigorous research (employing random assignment or quasi-experimental designs) on these reforms is extremely limited, two studies in particular have useful findings: they suggest that programs that integrate basic skills and GED instruction within specific career fields and support students in their transition to college show promise in increasing students’ rates of program persistence, earning a high school credential, and college entry and success.<sup>7</sup> Additional reforms, such as developing programs for low-skilled individuals, streamlining adult education funding and management, and increasing the research on adult education programs’ effectiveness, would also strengthen the field.

## What Is Adult Education?

Since 1964, with the passage of the Economic Opportunity Act, America’s federally and state-funded adult basic skills programs have been the primary vehicles for helping dropouts improve

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<sup>5</sup>GED Testing Service (2012a); Jizhi Zhang, Anne Guison-Dowdy, Margaret B. Patterson, and Wei Song, *Crossing the Bridge: GED Credentials and Postsecondary Education Outcomes: Year 2 Report* (Washington, DC: GED Testing Service, American Council on Education, 2011); John Tyler, “The General Educational Development (GED) Credential: History, Current Research, and Directions for Policy and Practice,” *Review of Adult Learning and Literacy* 5 (2005): Chapter 3, 45-84.

<sup>6</sup>James J. Heckman, John Eric Humphries, and Nicholas S. Mader, “The GED,” IZA Discussion Papers 4975 (Bonn, Germany: Institute for the Study of Labor [IZA], 2010); Richard Murnane, “U.S. High School Graduation Rates: Patterns and Explanations,” *Journal of Economic Literature* 5, 2 (2013): 370-422.

<sup>7</sup>Vanessa Martin and Joseph Broadus, “Enhancing GED Instruction to Prepare Students for College and Careers: Early Success in LaGuardia Community College’s Bridge to Health and Business Program,” Policy Brief (New York: MDRC, 2013); Davis Jenkins, Matthew Zeidenberg, and Gregory S. Kienzl, “Educational Outcomes of I-BEST, Washington State Community and Technical College System’s Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training Program: Findings from a Multivariate Analysis,” CCRC Working Paper No. 16 (New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2009).

their skills and earn a high school credential.<sup>8</sup> Enrolling over two million students in the 2010-2011 program year (the most recent year for which data are available), federally funded adult education programs comprise three different courses of instruction: adult basic education (ABE), for individuals with skills below the ninth-grade level; adult secondary education (ASE), for individuals with high school-level skills;<sup>9</sup> and English literacy (EL), for adults who lack proficiency in English.<sup>10</sup> Each year, approximately 1.2 million students enroll in ABE and ASE programs, which together form a primary way that adult learners prepare for earning a high school credential and going to college.

Though a number of pathways exist for obtaining a high school credential, students most commonly take the GED exam for that purpose. Developed by the nonprofit American Council on Education (ACE), which has operated it for more than 40 years, the GED exam is now the product of a joint partnership between ACE and Pearson, Inc., a for-profit publishing company.<sup>11</sup>

## What Are the Challenges to Moving Students Forward?

The students in adult education programs are quite diverse, ranging from highly skilled, highly motivated immigrants who need to learn English to U.S. high school dropouts, who often distrust the educational system. Thus, adult education systems often confront a variety of student and programmatic issues, including:

1. **Low-level student skills:** Nearly 80 percent of the students who enter ABE and ASE programs have skills below the ninth-grade level, with over 40 percent entering with skills below the sixth-grade level. Many of these students have key deficits in reading, writing, or math, and often a limited background in other important subject areas that are necessary for achieving a high school credential, such as social studies and science.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Claudia Tamassia, Marylou Lennon, Kentaro Yamamoto, and Irwin Kirsch, *Adult Education in America: A First Look at Results from the Adult Education Program and Learner Surveys* (Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 2007).

<sup>9</sup>ASE generally includes programs that help students prepare for the General Educational Development (GED) certificate or adult diploma through a school system.

<sup>10</sup>U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, *Adult Education and Family Literacy Act of 1998: Annual Report to Congress, Program Year 10-2011* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2013a). This report focuses on students attending ABE and ASE programs.

<sup>11</sup>American Council on Education, “ACE and Pearson Collaborate to Transform GED Test, Aligned with Common Core State Standards, Based on GED 21st Century Initiative” (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 2011). Web site: [www.acenet.edu](http://www.acenet.edu).

<sup>12</sup>U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education (2013a).

2. **At-risk population:** Students attending adult education programs tend to face multiple life challenges, including single parenthood, poverty, and heavy work schedules among those who are employed.<sup>13</sup>
3. **Transient program participation and engagement:** Individuals frequently drop out of adult education programs or “stop out” (meaning they leave programs and then return after a period of time).<sup>14</sup> In order to make up for this transient attendance, programs often implement open enrollment systems, allowing new students to enter classes on a weekly or even daily basis.<sup>15</sup> This continual influx of new students tends to complicate teachers’ efforts to develop more coherent sets of lessons that build from day to day.
4. **Financial constraints:** Though both federal and state grants provide funding for adult education, these resources tend to be very limited and place a number of restrictions on the types of students who can be served and the timing of programs.<sup>16</sup> Given these issues, most adult education programs survive on very small budgets, which amount to less than 10 percent of the resources spent on the average student in kindergarten through grade 12 (K-12).<sup>17</sup>
5. **Teachers:** A large number of adult education programs hire part-time instructors, and programs typically provide little to no paid professional development time for instructors to increase their knowledge.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Beth Lasater and Barbara Elliot, *Profiles of the Adult Education Target Population* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2005); John Comings, Andrea Parrella, and Lisa Soricone, “Persistence Among Adult Basic Education Students in Pre-GED Classes,” NCSALL Report No. 12 (Cambridge, MA: National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 1999).

<sup>14</sup>Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (1999); Ajit Gopalakrishan, “Learner Retention in Adult Secondary Education: A Comparative Study,” *Adult Basic Education and Literacy Journal* 2, 3 (Fall 2008): 140-150.

<sup>15</sup>Hal Beder and Patsy Medina, “Classroom Dynamics in Adult Literacy Education,” NCSALL Reports No. 18 (Cambridge, MA: National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, Harvard University Graduate School of Education, 2001).

<sup>16</sup>U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, *Investing in America’s Future: A Blueprint for Transforming Career and Technical Education* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2012); Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy, *Reach Higher, America: Overcoming Crisis in the U.S. Workforce, Report of the National Commission for Adult Literacy* (New York: Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy, 2008).

<sup>17</sup>U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, *Adult Education and Family Literacy Act: Program Facts* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2005).

<sup>18</sup>Christine Smith, Judy Hofer, Marilyn Gillespie, Marla Solomon, and Karen Rowe, “How Teachers Change: A Study of Professional Development in Adult Education,” NCSALL Report No. 25 (Cam-

6. **Content and pedagogy:** Unlike K-12 schools, which often base instruction on particular content standards or curricula, adult education programs generally have fewer supports and, even when they are available, have few resources to implement these standards. Instead, instruction is often based on lectures using test preparation materials from commercially available GED, pre-GED, or other test-preparation workbooks.<sup>19</sup>
7. **Fragmented funding, management, and administration:** Adult education programs tend to subsist on a complicated array of federal and state funding streams, which are managed by numerous government agencies.<sup>20</sup> For instance, at least four different federal agencies oversee the initiatives and grants that are used to fund adult education programs, with multiple entities overseeing local adult education programs in individual states.<sup>21</sup>

## Where Are We Now? Current Reforms for Improving Students' Success

Given the challenges described above, innovators have been seeking to develop more coherent systems for increasing dropouts' rates of earning a high school credential and making a successful transition to college. As outlined below, these reforms fall into three broad types of interventions.

### Standards-Based Reforms

In an effort to better prepare students for college, adult education policymakers, practitioners, and researchers have begun pushing for more rigorous standards for adult education instruction and high school credentialing. Generally, those efforts have tried to align adult education instruction with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), a set of competencies and procedures in English language arts and math in K-12 that have been adopted by 45 states nationwide.<sup>22</sup> For example, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult

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bridge, MA: National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2003).

<sup>19</sup>Beder and Medina (2001).

<sup>20</sup>Kermit Kaleba and Rachel Gragg, *Training Policy in Brief: An Overview of Federal Workforce Development Policies* (Washington, DC: National Skills Coalition, 2011).

<sup>21</sup>For a description, for example, of the system in Indiana, see Patrick J. Kelly, *Recommended Policies and Practices for Advancing Indiana's System of Adult Education and Workforce Training* (Boulder, CO: National Center for Higher Education Management Systems [NCHEMS], 2009).

<sup>22</sup>National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, *Common Core State Standards* (Washington, DC: National Governors Association, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Web site: [www.corestandards.org/the-standards](http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards).

Education (OVAE) is aiming to align adult education instruction with the CCSS through its Promoting College and Career Readiness Standards in Adult Basic Education project.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, the GED Testing Service (GEDTS) has been focused on reforming the GED exam so that it tracks with the CCSS, with a new test scheduled to take effect in January 2014.<sup>24</sup>

Though not yet passed, other efforts are also under way to promote more concrete connections among adult education, postsecondary education, and workforce training. Initiatives include President Obama's establishment of the Interagency Adult Education Working Group, which was charged with highlighting new methods for improving adults' transition to postsecondary education and employment;<sup>25</sup> the development of the Adult Education and Economic Growth Act, which seeks to consolidate the multiple agencies serving low-skilled adults and refocus education and workforce training on college- and career-readiness skills;<sup>26</sup> and calls to revise the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act so that it aligns career and technical education programs with college- and career-readiness standards.<sup>27</sup>

### **GED-to-College Bridge Programs**

Other interventions have sought to integrate academic preparation with increased supports for students' transition to college. Often called college bridge, GED bridge, GED-to-college bridge, or college transition programs, these efforts generally integrate more rigorous academic curricula with intensive supplemental supports for college entry, such as one-on-one advising on careers, introductions to the college admissions process, and step-by-step supports for completing college entrance requirements. In addition, these programs often provide more exposure to workforce or career training by structuring the content of their courses around industry-specific skills or direct job-training opportunities. GED-to-college bridge programs range from full-time models geared toward youth to part-time programs focused on specific industries or careers.

Despite the proliferation of these programs, very little evidence exists about their success. The one exception is a small-scale random assignment study of LaGuardia Community

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<sup>23</sup>U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, *Promoting College and Career-Ready Standards in Adult Basic Education*, Adult Basic and Literacy Education Fact Sheet (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2011b).

<sup>24</sup>American Council on Education (2011).

<sup>25</sup>U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, *Bridges to Opportunity: Federal Adult Education Program for the 21st Century*, Report to the President on Executive Order 13445 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 2008).

<sup>26</sup>Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy (2008).

<sup>27</sup>U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education (2012).



College's GED Bridge program, which showed promising increases in students' course persistence, GED pass rates, college matriculation, and college success.<sup>28</sup>

### **Programs Promoting Concurrent Enrollment in Adult Education and College**

A number of efforts are also under way nationwide to allow dropouts to concurrently enroll in college classes while they are still preparing to earn their high school credential. These programs tend to have attributes that are similar to those of GED-to-college bridge programs, with the added benefit of allowing students to earn college credits before they have earned their high school credential. College classes range from nontransferable courses, such as developmental education or "college success" courses (which teach students how to navigate through college life, including teaching them study skills, how to access various student resources, and so forth), to transferable, credit-bearing classes, often in specific industries or career fields. The most advanced of these programs are nested within college or statewide credentialing pathways programs, which consist of a series of successive certificate and degree programs through which students advance as they build their skills.

As with GED-to-college bridge programs, rigorous research on these programs is limited. However, one quasi-experimental study of the state of Washington's I-BEST program reported increases in students' adult education program persistence, GED pass rates, and matriculation into college, which, if confirmed by additional and more rigorous studies, would be encouraging.<sup>29</sup> Further rigorous evaluations of initiatives such as Accelerating Opportunity, Innovative Strategies for Increasing Self-Sufficiency (ISIS), and YouthBuild's Postsecondary Education Initiative are also expected to add to this research base in the coming years.<sup>30</sup>

### **How Far Have We Come? Assessing the Progress of Current Reforms**

The standards-based reforms, GED-to-college bridge programs, and concurrent college and adult education programs highlighted above have helped the field advance in a number of ways, including:

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<sup>28</sup>Martin and Broadus (2013).

<sup>29</sup>Jenkins, Zeidenberg, and Kienzl (2009).

<sup>30</sup>Randall Wilson, Robert Lerman, Lauren Eyster, Maureen Conway, and Burt Barnow, "Accelerating Opportunity Evaluation: Planning the Evaluation with the Accelerated Opportunity States," PowerPoint presentation (Boston: Jobs for the Future, 2012); David J. Fein, "Career Pathways as a Framework for Program Design and Evaluation: A Working Paper from the Innovative Strategies for Increasing Self-Sufficiency (ISIS) Project," OPRE Report No. 2012-30 (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012).

1. **Developing more coherent and relevant instructional models.** GED-to-college bridge and concurrent enrollment programs tend to be centered around a continuous set of lessons, which integrate basic skills preparation into contextualized or college-readiness curricula that better align with students' career goals. Instruction is often facilitated by short-term managed enrollment processes, which permit new students to enter programs only during set time periods, thereby allowing teachers to develop more coherent lesson cycles that can build upon students' day-to-day learning.
2. **Cultivating connections with postsecondary education.** Most of the college bridge and concurrent enrollment programs highlighted in this report have developed more concrete connections to postsecondary institutions, thereby reducing the isolation and fragmentation that often typifies adult education programs. Most have done this by housing programs within colleges; however, a few community-based organizations have facilitated these connections through partnerships with local postsecondary institutions.
3. **Integrating supplemental supports to foster engagement and transition.** GED-to-college bridge and concurrent enrollment programs have also addressed students' transient engagement by integrating college transition counseling, advising, and other supports into their programs. Such supports are designed to help students better manage the complicated college enrollment process and build their understanding of college expectations. In addition, many programs provide supplemental supports such as help with financial, legal, and health needs, which assist at-risk students in remaining engaged in school.<sup>31</sup>

## **How Much Further Do We Have to Go? Overcoming Continuing Barriers**

While innovators have made a number of advances, adult education is still in critical need of reform across a number of areas if the field is to see larger-scale improvements in academic success among high school dropouts. Key issues, along with promising ways of overcoming these challenges, are highlighted below.

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<sup>31</sup>Martin and Broadus (2013).

## **Students with Low-Level Skills**

Many of the innovations in adult education limit program participation to students with skills at the ninth-grade level or above, which effectively bars lower-skilled students from receiving services. Given the large proportion of low-skilled individuals in adult education programs, leaders in the field should make it a priority to develop programs that incorporate this student population. The promising advances made by programs that have enrolled lower-skilled students, such as LaGuardia Community College's GED Bridge and the state of Washington's I-BEST programs, reveal that these students can be successful when given the opportunity to participate in these reforms.<sup>32</sup> College bridge and concurrent enrollment programs might thus consider lifting their skill-level restrictions. In addition, programs might consider building prebridge models that help prepare students for these more advanced programs.

## **Fragmented Funding Streams**

Many adult education programs remain hampered by the fragmented funding streams and agencies upon which they depend for support, with a confusing array of services offered within one community or city. Additionally, while a number of policy measures have been drafted in an effort to reform this fragmentation, these initiatives have often been frustrated by the slow-moving political process or a lack of will to enact such changes. Given the important role that management and finance has for implementing adult education reforms, practitioners, policymakers, and researchers should continue to push for reframing the policies that govern adult education funding and administration. Promising models for this work have been suggested in the Adult Education and Economic Growth Act and proposed revisions to the Perkins Act, both of which seek to reorganize adult education around workforce training and education milestones relevant for the 21st century labor market.<sup>33</sup> In addition, statewide reform efforts like the one taking place in Indiana, which seek to align and integrate adult education with workforce development programs across the state, could serve as models for how such state and local interagency integration and coordination could be achieved.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Martin and Broadus (2013); Jenkins, Zeidenberg, and Kienzl (2009).

<sup>33</sup>Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy (2008); U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education (2008, 2012).

<sup>34</sup>Indiana Department of Workforce Development, "WorkINdiana Frequently Asked Questions" (Indianapolis: Indiana Department of Workforce Development, 2013a); Indiana Department of Workforce Development, "WorkINdiana One Pager" (Indianapolis: Indiana Department of Workforce Development, 2013b).

## **Developing a Better Knowledge Base**

Developing better knowledge systems for understanding adult education program innovations and their effectiveness is also critical to the adult education reform agenda. Efforts to build this knowledge base should focus on the practices described below.

- **Enrich the data by tracking student participation across multiple educational institutions, including information on program type and time to completion for students of differing skill levels.**

The U.S. Department of Education has developed a rich database, known as the National Reporting System, to track adult education student outcomes, including information such as students' skill levels, high school credentialing, workforce participation, and college enrollment.<sup>35</sup> Researchers and policymakers should look to expand this data system in the following ways.

First, policymakers should work to build more wide-ranging educational data systems that can be used to longitudinally track students' participation in multiple education programs, including secondary, postsecondary, and adult education. Second, the ability to link student outcome data with program characteristics, such as the subject areas taught and curricula used, would help to provide a clearer picture of how different program models may be connected with student outcomes. Finally, the field should develop timelines of average time to completion of particular milestones, such as movement from one skill level to another or high school completion, for students of varying skill levels. Tracking of the time to completion of such milestones would help practitioners in the field gain a better understanding of the level of resources needed to support students of differing abilities as well as track the promise of new initiatives.

- **Strive for a common language about adult education.**

Adult education reformers should seek to better understand the different types of adult education program models and assess more carefully the varying effects they may have on different groups of students. For instance, an adult education program that provides only modest supports for college transition and limited instruction, or serves primarily lower-skilled students, is likely to have different effects from one with more intensive services aimed at higher-skilled students. Differentiating factors such as the level of instruction, support services offered, and the skill of the students served would provide clearer indicators of what types of programs may hold the most promise for advancing students' skills.

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<sup>35</sup>U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education (2013a).

- **Build more rigorous research designs.**

Policymakers, researchers, and practitioners should make it a priority to develop a research agenda that can expand the field’s knowledge about the effectiveness of new adult education reforms. Such investigations might begin with quasi-experimental analyses, which attempt to control for certain factors such as students’ background characteristics, to understand the associations between particular program reforms and students’ achievement. When possible, however, more rigorous, experimental analyses, which use random assignment methodology, should also be explored. Such investigations would allow for a causal link to be established between new adult education reforms and any resulting changes in students’ achievement.

In considering a research agenda, researchers and policymakers should seek to analyze those programs that appear to hold the most promise for rapidly decreasing the amount of time students spend preparing to earn a high school credential and increasing their successful transition to college. A demonstration that focuses on several permutations of program reform, differentiating by aspects such as the intensity of instruction (for example, part-time versus full-time programs), student skill levels (such as those offered for lower-skilled students versus the higher-skilled), or level of college access (for instance, models that offer concurrent college and GED program enrollment versus a sequential GED-then-college approach), would add to an understanding of the types of programs that may be most beneficial for various adult populations.

## **Conclusion**

While there is debate about the rate of growth of middle-skills/middle-wage jobs that provide better pay than unskilled jobs, these middle-skills jobs generally require education and training that are similar to what is offered as part of vocational certificate and associate’s degree programs.<sup>36</sup> This need underscores the importance of advancing the skills of high school dropouts and tackling the barriers to educating this population. Developing innovative education models such as the reforms that are highlighted in this report and building a better research base on their effectiveness represent two important steps that U.S. policymakers can take to help dropouts — and the country — build their success in a higher-paying, skills-based marketplace.

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<sup>36</sup>Harry J. Holzer and Robert I. Lerman, *America’s Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs: Education and Training Requirements in the Next Decade and Beyond* (Washington, DC: Workforce Alliance, 2007); Paul Sommers and Drew Osborne, *Middle-Wage Jobs in Metropolitan America* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute, 2009); David H. Autor, Lawrence F. Katz, and Melissa S. Kearney, “Trends in U.S. Wage Inequality: Revising the Revisionists,” *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 90, 2 (May 2008): 300-323.

## About MDRC

MDRC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan social and education policy research organization dedicated to learning what works to improve the well-being of low-income people. Through its research and the active communication of its findings, MDRC seeks to enhance the effectiveness of social and education policies and programs.

Founded in 1974 and located in New York City and Oakland, California, MDRC is best known for mounting rigorous, large-scale, real-world tests of new and existing policies and programs. Its projects are a mix of demonstrations (field tests of promising new program approaches) and evaluations of ongoing government and community initiatives. MDRC's staff bring an unusual combination of research and organizational experience to their work, providing expertise on the latest in qualitative and quantitative methods and on program design, development, implementation, and management. MDRC seeks to learn not just whether a program is effective but also how and why the program's effects occur. In addition, it tries to place each project's findings in the broader context of related research — in order to build knowledge about what works across the social and education policy fields. MDRC's findings, lessons, and best practices are proactively shared with a broad audience in the policy and practitioner community as well as with the general public and the media.

Over the years, MDRC has brought its unique approach to an ever-growing range of policy areas and target populations. Once known primarily for evaluations of state welfare-to-work programs, today MDRC is also studying public school reforms, employment programs for ex-offenders and people with disabilities, and programs to help low-income students succeed in college. MDRC's projects are organized into five areas:

- Promoting Family Well-Being and Children's Development
- Improving Public Education
- Raising Academic Achievement and Persistence in College
- Supporting Low-Wage Workers and Communities
- Overcoming Barriers to Employment

Working in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada and the United Kingdom, MDRC conducts its projects in partnership with national, state, and local governments, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.